

Black History Month 2014: The Native Sons and Daughters of Alabama

Honoring Dr. Ethel Hall During Black History Month 2014

February 28, 2014

Ms. SEWELL of Alabama. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in honor of Black History month and my commitment to honoring influential African Americans that have impacted the state of Alabama and this nation. Today, I have the pleasure of sharing the inspiring story of Dr. Ethel Harris Hall. Dr. Hall was the first African American to serve on the Alabama State Board of Education and she was also the first African American Vice President of the Board of Education. In Alabama, we remember this exemplary educator for her role in breaking barriers in education and for her lifelong commitment to excellence.

Dr. Hall was born on February 23, 1928 in Morgan County Alabama to Harry and Fannie Mae Harris. The Harris' sent their daughter to Birmingham to ensure that she received a quality education. She attended Ullman High School, A.H. Parker High School, and Councill Training School. She was valedictorian of her class and went on to attend Alabama A&M University where she graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Science Degree in 1948. She also obtained masters degrees from the University of Chicago and Atlanta University. She continued her studies at the University of Alabama where she obtained a doctorate in social work in 1979.

Throughout her tenure, this stellar educator taught in various schools systems throughout the state of Alabama including Hale County Schools, Birmingham City Schools, and Jefferson County Schools. Dr. Hall also taught at the collegiate level and was the first African American faculty member at the University of Montevallo. She later taught in the school of social work at The University of Alabama where she retired in 1999.

On January 19, 1987 Dr. Hall made history when she became the first black elected to serve on the Alabama State Board of Education. During her 24 year tenure, she served six terms and became vice chair in 1994. Dr. Hall served on the State Board of Education during many tumultuous battles over issues such as funding levels for schools, teacher testing, accountability standards for schools and academic standards for students. In making these tough decisions, she always remained a woman of principle-putting Alabama's children first.

In 2010, shortly before her death, Dr. Hall published her autobiography entitled ``My Journey: A Memoir of the First African American to preside over the Alabama Board of Education." Dr. Hall stated that she felt It was important to share her story to inspire others to appreciate the opportunities they had been afforded. ``I wrote the book because as I worked on the state board I found so many young people who took education for granted," Hall said. ``They just assumed that everybody had the opportunity to go to school where they wanted to" In telling her story, she hoped to not only share her experiences as a trailblazer, but to tell others about how she saw Alabama's education system evolve through the years.

While we honor Dr. Hall for breaking barriers, we must also salute this extraordinary woman for her commitment to the students that she served. She led with grace and impeccable character that was defined by her passion for challenging students to be their very best. As a role model, she inspired her fellow educators to be servant leaders to their students and to their community. This beloved figure is also remembered for belief that all children deserved a quality education. Through her work she truly taught us to see education as the great equalizer.

During Black History month, simply saying thank you to Dr. Hall seems woefully inadequate but on behalf of a grateful nation we salute this pioneer and acknowledge her role not only in black history but American history.

Her story is a perfect illustration of passionate leadership and selfless service to mankind. I ask my colleagues to join me in honoring Dr. Ethel Harris Hall, a phenomenal woman and a great American.